

# 'Jaws', ideology and film theory

Recent developments in the theoretical study of film have shifted attention from the analysis of content to the significance of the way a film is constructed. Stephen Heath discusses these developments in the context of their application to the film *Jaws*

Every review of the film *Jaws* begins with some reference to its status as the film, not so much super-production as super-product, the box-office record-breaker expected to gross more than a quarter of a billion dollars. But the product also means (part of its meaning, of course, is to be "the most profitable movie in history"), and means as *entertainment*, a moving and pleasurable experience marketed and bought.

Analysis must grasp this pleasure-meaning, commodity complex, and recent developments in film theory—centred in Britain, with a powerful influence in the United States, around the work of the journal *Screen*, and feeding from there into film teaching—have been concerned to pose precisely the problems which arise from such an emphasis. Epitome of "cinema", *Jaws* can perhaps provide a focus for discussion that will allow something of these problems to be understood.

At one level, the ideology of *Jaws* is clear enough, the province of a traditional content analysis: *Jaws* is a Wateregate film: Mayor Larry Vaughan of Amity, Long Island, serves his electors ("Amity needs summer dollars") by hustling up a shark attack ("I was acting in the town's best interest"); the white male middle-class—not a single black and, very quickly, not a single woman in the film—in the person of police chief Martin Brody will recognize its comicality a literal slap in the face from the mayor of a boy who dies when the beaches are open) and pull the town through with an ordinary-guy brand of heroism born of fear and decency.

Order is fragile but possible, mistakes are made (Vaughan is simply weak, caught out trying his town, and Brody with him); the film is something else, call it a shark, but it is *Brody*—can redeem them (kill the shark), and better than any screwball romantic myth (Quint, a vague memory of *Moby Dick*, of which *Jaws* is the middle-class re-licke) or any expert (Hooper, the whizz-kid in all the equipment finally defeated by a shark).

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Other elements extend from this core with a symptomatic rightness: as for example, the story Quint tells of the sinking of the *Indinapolis* in shark-infested waters after transporting the Hiroshima bomb ("1,100 men went into the water, 360 men came out, anyway we delivered the bomb"). The story functions to motivate Quint's character as determined shark-killer, but does so excessively, placing—in the play between Quint, Hooper and Brody, as they wait out at sea in the summer of America's final year in Vietnam—destruction and justice and manliness and menace and just doing-the-job (the scene ends with the three men joining in a song—"Show me the way to go home"—interrupted by the shark outside trying to rip into their world).

This clear ideology, the narrative image of the film, is made up of such elements held in a loose coherence around the central core, and working in the space of the film. It is the "working-space" that is important; it is to remain at the level of a content analysis in these terms is to fail to engage with the ideological operation of the film, its production, as also—the two running together as a set of relations—with the pleasure derived from this film about a shark and its pursuers. In short, it is to fail to engage with the fact of film.

The fact of film has been the concern of film theory in its attempts to define film as a specific object of study, and it is in this context that one can grasp the initial role of structuralism and the early "structuralist" semiology.

Semiological description brought consideration of the ways in which meanings are articulated in film. In particular, attention was given to the codes of the image (the construction of iconic signs, problems of denotation and connotation) and to the codes of the arrangement of film in sequences (the definition of syntagmatic units, the structures of film narrative).

This last was a part of the work of the French theoretician Christian Metz whose *Lanquage and Cinema*, published in 1971, is a rigorous investigation of the whole idea of cinema as language, a mapping out of the difficulties involved in the linguistic analogy, in order to give precision to the use of the term "language" in respect of film.

*Language and Cinema* rests firmly (and finely) within the limits of "structuralist" semiological description, focused on the object cinema, as opposed to the operation cinema. Its effect, nevertheless, taken in conjunction with surrounding theoretical

developments—the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics—to which Metz's own later work has responded, was to allow the "language-and-cinema" problem to be henceforth understood as that of the study of film as *specific signifying practice*.

Signifying indicates the recognition of film as system or series of systems of meaning, process of this articulation. Practice stresses the refusal to hold under the assumption of notions such as "representation" and "expression"; it takes film as a work of production of meanings and in so doing brings into the analysis the question of the positioning of the subject within that work, its relations of the subject, what kind of "reader" and "author" it constructs. Specific represents the need for analysis to understand film in the particularity of the work it engages, the differences it sustains with other signifying practices. This does not, however, entail pulling film towards some aesthetic idea of a pure cinematicity (on a line with the idea of "literarity" derived in literary criticism from Russian formalism, which has often become a way of avoiding crucial issues of production and ideology in its precise appeal to a technicist "structuralist poetics").

Specifically here is semiotic, and a semiotic analysis of film—of film as signifying practice—is the analysis of a heterogeneity, the range of codes and systems at work in film over and across its five matters of expression (moving photographic image, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noise, later as, for example, in the prominent "Amity welcomes you" boarding in *Jaws*).

Specificity is thus both those codes particular to cinema (codes of articulation of dialogue and image, codes of scale of shot, certain codes of narrative organization, etc.) and the particular inscriptions of subject and meaning and ideology. Different in the way that

heterogeneity in its particular effects, its particular inscriptions of subject and meaning and ideology. Directed in this way, the study of film is of neither "contents" nor "forms" but, breaking the deadlock of that opposition, of operations, of the process of film and the relations of subjectivity in that process.

Such a direction can further be seen as holding in a fundamental intersection three component areas: the conditions of film production and distribution, the individual film, and the general apparatus of cinema. As was said earlier, the film industry manufactures film products but these products mean and sell on meaning and pleasure; between *marketing* and text, we also need a category like *machine*.

This category is cinema itself, understood in its stock of constraints and definitions, its possibilities and points of determination, with respect to which film can be distinguished as specific signifying practice and a particular film seized dialectically in its operation. Each of the three areas can bring with it its own set of tasks and study procedures, but attention to their intersection is constantly important.

In the light of these propositions, let us come back to *Jaws*, to this particular film. Space will not permit detailed analysis of the movement of its filmic system; one or two fragmentary indications must serve to suggest the terms of that movement, and lead on to some consideration of machine and industry, indications that will be developed from the opening shots of the film.

The first shot has the camera underwater veering rapidly forward through the seabed forest to the accompaniment of ominous rhythmic music. Cut to a group of young people at a night-time beach party; the cut is heavily marked by changes in colour, from the coldish underwater tones to the rich orange-yellow reflections of a fire, in music, a youth is playing a harmonica, and in rhythm, the camera now tracks smoothly right along the group—faces kissing, smoking, drinking—until it stops on a young man looking off-frame.

Eye-line cut to the girl who is revealed as the object of his gaze, followed by a cut to a high angle shot down onto the party establishing its overall space. Then comes a run down to the sea, the girl shedding her clothes as the boy stumbles drunkenly after; as she swims out, the boy collapses; an underwater shot, now moving up to the surface between the girl's legs, precedes the shark's attack; the next morning the boy wakes, sits up into frame as we look out with him on the empty ocean.

For the narrative, this sequence is precisely and simply the beginning, the



Swimmers scatter from a New England beach on the sighting of a shark in "Jaws".

initial premise: the arrival of the shark. At the same time, however, it sets off a number of other series which knot together as figures over the film.

Thus, for example, the presence of the shark is given in the very first shot with its violent underwater movement tied to no human point of view, and the underwater shot is then used in the first part of the film to signify the inhumanity of attack; we are placed as the shark as it rises to the girl and, later, to the little boy on the float.

Once systematized, it can be used to client: it occurs to confirm the second day-time beach attack, but this is only two boys with an imitation fin. More importantly, the shot binds up with an immediate marking out, in the sequence, of a danger of sexuality and the displacement of the latter onto the shark: the girl leads the boy on; as she strips, he follows with "I'm coming, I'm definitely coming"; when she is ready, he lies on the beach moaning again "I'm coming, I'm coming" (the novel has the report of the attack held up while the duty patrolman finishes reading a story about a woman who castrates an assailant with a knife secreted in her hair).

One inextorable movement of the film is then to get rid of women: in an exact rhyming inversion of the girl's provocative run down to the sea, where the shark is ready, Brody's wife runs—with a similar following shot, now from left to right—away from the sea, out of Quint's shark-hung lar ("Here's to swimming with bow-legged women!"), out of the film, as the men set off to deal with the evil, the boat seen in long shot through a trophy par of shark's jaws.

The stress on dismemberment—after the girl, all the victims are male and the focus is on losing legs—finds its resonance in this context, as too does the scene where Quint and Hooper compare shark wounds (and drink to their legs!), as again does the apparently gratuitous image of the old man in the bathing cap with hanging breasts, who comes to taunt Brody with his fear of the water.

This excess over the narrative in the opening sequence disturbs the coherence of the end, in the former we look out with the boy over the menacing sea (in short elsewhere repeated from Brody's point of view); in the latter we look with Brody and Hooper from the sea back to the land, the menace destroyed. Brody's fear overcome ("I used to hate the water, I can't imagine why"); a closing—rhymingly inverted—high-angle shot establishes the beach again, empty and clean. But what cannot be resolved is the whole shark displacement, the elements of the first sequence are left hanging, and no woman comes back—here too *Jaws* is a white male film.

Such indications begin to show something of the multiple series working over the narrative in a film text, series that combine across the different matters of expression and codes in rhymes, repetitions, turns. In fact, film is potentially a veritable flux of affects, a plurality of intensities, and narrative functions to contain that affectivity, which is thus "re-released" as "excess", "disturbance" of "figure"—symptomatic demonstrations of the work of containment.

This engages the intersection with cinema the machine. Narrative is not essential to cinema, but historically the latter has been developed and exploited as a narrative form: against dispersion, for representation, where representation is less immediately a matter of

"what is represented" than of positioning; narrative in cinema is first and foremost the organization of a point of view through the image-flow, the laying out of an intelligibility, the conversion of seen into scene as the direction of the viewing-subject.

The grounding of vision in the subject as the perspective of intelligibility is crucial. Cinema is implicated in a founding ideology of vision as truth (Lumiere aims "to reproduce life itself"), but film, in its flux, can also produce discontinuities, disruptions, a need to reconstruct that truth of vision, to establish ways for holding a film's relations as the coherence of the subject-eye—continuity techniques, matches, 30 degree and 180 degree rules, codes of framing, and so on.

Indeed, the drama of vision becomes a constant reflexive fascination in films. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* in a supreme example, but *Jaws* is also relevant with its play on the unseen and unforeseeable, the hidden shark and the moments of violent interruption—the corpse in the boat-hull, the shark rearing from the water close behind Brody as he shovels clum.

*Jaws*, moreover, has the whole film summarized in the images flickeringly reflected on Brody's glasses as he skims through the pages of the books about sharks, occasionally fixing a corresponding image—the whole film except, precisely, for Brody, the vision to come, the film's "resolution".

Film is the constant process of a phasing-in of vision, the pleasure of that process—movement and fixity and movement again, from fragment (actually thematized in *Jaws* as dismemberment) to totality (the jubilation of the final image). Genres are different balances of the process, shifting regulations of the subject, particular closures of desire. But genres are also necessities of the industry, the optimal exploitation of the production apparatus requiring the containment of creative work within established frameworks. This double determination brings us back once more to the complex of intersection: films are industrial products, and they mean, and they sell not simply on the particular meaning but, equally on the pleasure of cinema, that yielding the return that allows the perpetuation of the industry (which is why part of the meaning of *Jaws* is to be the most profitable movie); a film is not reducible to its "ideology" but is also the working over of that ideology in cinema, with the industry dependent on the pleasure of the operation. The problems for film theory today are those of approaching an understanding of the fact of film in these terms.

*Jaws* has placed the focus here on the dominant American cinema. But it must be stressed that such an understanding is a point of development in certain areas of avant-garde film, seeking to pose the material conditions of film in the interests of alternative practices, other cinema.

Film theory has continually to learn from those practices, which must indeed provide its very edge; as it has too, dialectically, to turn back into them, a moment of their advance in the transformation of the relations of subject and meaning in film. The study of Hollywood film (*Jaws* included), its strategies, its frictions, its pleasure, can have an importance in this context—it only that study be directed, critically and specifically, to Hollywood film itself as signifying practice.

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